



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO H.E. MR KINGSLEY SUNNY EBENYI,
AMBASSADOR OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF NIGERIA
TO THE HOLY SEE***

Thursday, 27 May 2004

Mr Ambassador,

As you come to the Vatican to present the Letters accrediting you Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to the Holy See, I offer you a cordial welcome. Not only does your presence here today remind me of the warm and enthusiastic reception I received during my Pastoral Visits to your country in 1981 and 1998, but the kind greetings you bring from President Obasanjo rekindle the memory of our friendly meeting here in the Vatican during the Jubilee Year 2000. I ask you to convey my good wishes to His Excellency the President and to assure him of my prayers for the well-being of the nation.

I am pleased to hear you refer to your country's commitment to good governance and to the consolidation of democracy. Indeed, having made the important transition from military rule to a civilian government, the challenge before you now is to build up and strengthen your young democracy, increasing the participation of all segments of the population in a representative and juridically safeguarded ordering of public life. An essential requirement in this regard is the need for political authority to be exercised with transparency and accountability. Public life, both on the national and international levels, is to be guided by "four precise requirements of the human spirit: truth, justice, love and freedom" (*Message for the 2003 World Day of Peace*, No. 3). I encourage Nigeria to be ever more committed to this courageous democratic endeavour undertaken with a deep sense and spirit of service to its people. Indeed, there exists an indissoluble bond between peace and truth that must be recognized if men and women are to live in freedom, justice and security. "Honesty in the supply of information, equity in legal systems, openness in democratic procedures give citizens a sense of security, a readiness to settle controversies by peaceful means, and a desire for genuine and constructive dialogue, all of which constitute the true premises of a lasting peace" (*ibid.*, No. 8). When people more fully grasp the meaning and consequences of events in their own lives and in the world, they are better equipped to make effective contributions to peace, especially through the proper use of societal structures and mechanisms — juridical, political, economic — to serve the common good. Of course, as the Federal Republic seeks ever greater national stability and unity along the path of increased democratization of society and institutions, challenges are not lacking. Moral courage and political wisdom

are necessary, for example, in dealing effectively with the outbreaks of violence in the Niger Delta region, with the political and ethnic tensions in the north-west, and with the problems of corruption, poverty and disease. Through a resolute commitment to work tirelessly and steadfastly for the cause of peace, for the defence of human dignity and human rights, for the integral development of every individual, these challenges can be met and the way will be prepared for heightening awareness of the common destiny and interdependence that links all Nigerians, and indeed all peoples, as members of the one great family of mankind. Increasingly, Nigeria has emerged as a country predisposed to serve the cause of peace and development through international institutions such as the African Union and the United Nations. I encourage Nigerian leaders to be steadfast in their solidarity with other nations in order that a free and just world may become a reality. In the service of peace, which is also the service of truth, religion has a vital role to play. It makes its most effective contribution in this area by concentrating on those things that are proper to it: "attention to God, the fostering of universal brotherhood and the spreading of a culture of human solidarity" (*ibid.*, No. 9). Now, when communities or peoples of different religious convictions or cultures live in the same area it can sometimes happen that tensions will develop or increase, which, because of the strong passions involved, can turn into violent conflict. For this reason, it is of paramount importance to recall that "recourse to violence in the name of religious belief is a perversion of the very teachings of the major religions. I reaffirm here what many religious figures have repeated so often: the use of violence can never claim a religious justification, nor can it foster the growth of true religious feeling" (*Message for the 1999 World Day of Peace*, No. 5). The Catholic Church in Nigeria is committed to the peaceful advancement of the nation, especially through her presence in the fields of education, health care and social services. The effective guarantee of the right of religious freedom will enable Catholics to continue to work for the spiritual and material progress of society. In this regard, I am confident that the Government will fulfil its commitment to address the difficulties faced by foreign missionary workers seeking visa renewals. It is also my fervent hope that tensions between diverse ethnic and religious communities, escalating to the point of violence and even murder in some parts of the country, will be defused by sincere dialogue and efforts aimed at reconciliation and mutual understanding and cooperation. Mr Ambassador, I trust that your mission will serve to strengthen the ties of friendship existing between your country and the Holy See. As you assume your new responsibilities I offer you my prayerful good wishes, and I assure you that the various offices of the Roman Curia will be ready to assist you in the fulfilment of your duties. Upon you and the beloved people of Nigeria I cordially invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty

God.

**Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, vol. XXVII, 1, p. 695-697. *L'Osservatore Romano* 28.5.2004 p.8. *L'Osservatore Romano. Weekly Edition in English* n.24 p.8, 9.